

Professor Bridgette Gasas, newly elected chair of Allan Gray Orbis Foundation



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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With a number of qualifications in architecture, business and construction, including a PhD in Construction Management from the Nelson Mandela University and extensive experience of having chaired several boards, Professor Bridgette Gasas has been named the new chair of the [Allan Gray Orbis Foundation](#).



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Professor Gasas is also the first female, and the first African, to be appointed President of the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) Africa. She has been awarded a number of accolades recognizing her work in science, technology and business. These include the Department of Science & Technology's Award for a Leading Woman Scientist in the Industry in 2008, and South Africa's Most Influential Businesswoman in Basic Industries in 2013. She has also been named one of Choiseul Africa's 100 Economic Leaders of the Future in 2015, and most recently, SADC's Most Influential Woman in Construction in 2016.

In addition to this long list of achievements, Professor Gasas is the founder of The Elilox Group, a company that provides services with a special focus on programme and project management as well as infrastructure development.

As part of our Women's Month feature, it's only apt that we find out more from the newly appointed Chair of the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, which is dedicated to investing in the education and development of individuals with entrepreneurial potential within Southern Africa.

■ **Can you tell us a bit about yourself?**

I was born and raised in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal to a family of five. Our late parents were very well-respected members of society and quite educated. They were exemplary citizens and both pioneered great works in the education sector and my mom would later enter the space of politics – in which she was quite active right up until the day she passed on.

Coming from a family like mine – one was always in the spotlight, thankfully mostly for good things. My upbringing was an enabling one, one in which encouraged me to pursue my dreams without limitations.

■ **You've recently been appointed as chair of the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation. How did this come about?**

Other than the fact that the current Allan Gray Orbis Foundation Board took a unanimous decision in February 2020 that I should ascend to the role of chairperson, I started off as a mentor to Candidate Fellows in 2011. The mentorships I participated in were successful and led to me gaining visibility within the Foundation and ultimately being recognised and appointed as a Trustee of the Foundation in 2013.

I have served as a Trustee of the Foundation for over seven (7) years – in various capacities namely: as Chair of the Human Resources and Remuneration Committee and also as Chair of the Awards Committee prior to now being appointed as overall Chairperson of the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation.

■ **What is the core function of the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation?**

The Foundation was established to (amongst other things) foster entrepreneurship for the common good, and in particular create employment opportunities by enabling young South Africans with the necessary potential, regardless of their background and individual economic circumstances, to acquire the appropriate education, moral compass, mind-set, experience and financial support to succeed as responsible entrepreneurs.

■ **In your new role, what do you hope to achieve?**

I consider business entrepreneurs as the primary catalyst for the important function of job creation in South Africa. If entrepreneurs are successful, they will become self-sustaining and their profits can finance further growth, create further employment opportunities and generate revenues which in turn fund essential government initiatives.

“ Successful business entrepreneurs, their employees, and indirectly the fiscus, are thus empowered to also make possible the funding of civil society organisations and social entrepreneurs. ”

This is what I would like the Foundation to continue striving to achieve, beyond the investment we have been demonstratively making over the years in educating young South Africans.

■ **Do you have any role models? If so, who?**

Other than being phenomenally inspired by my late parents, I continue to be inspired by anyone who fully lives out the principle of: 'To whom much is given, much more is expected'.

“ I'm inspired by a number of female entrepreneurs that have thrived through very trying circumstances and summited peaks in their respective industries. ”

I loathe to mention names in the event that I omit one and then I am in trouble. But every hard-working female entrepreneur, whose results are tangible and through their work: impact has been felt – is an inspiration to me. Because I for one know, that they have had to work twice as hard to achieve the due recognition they deserve.

■ **You have quite a successful career with numerous accolades. What are some of the highlights you would like to share with us?**

All the projects I have worked on over the years have been special to me and I cannot single out just one. Except to say the latest one - the 10th medical school in South Africa.

“ The Nelson Mandela Medical School that is opening its doors in 2021 has got to be the work I am absolutely most proud of because of its scale and because of its impact. ”

The recognition given by my peers over the years, expressed through industry awards has been most heartening –

because it speaks to the outputs of hard-slog, but it is also an applaud for what people see even as you were not doing anything particularly with the intention of being seen.

■ ***Are South African women getting enough of a chance to shine in the startup ecosystem?***

I think they are, now. That was not always the case. I established my own business (at age 32) and seeing it succeed over the years whether I was physically on site or not – has been a singular pleasure and vote of confidence to those that work out our company's vision every day.

■ ***You've held seats on various boards in SA. How do you keep a work-life balance?***

I do not want to lie, I struggle in the front of achieving a work-life balance. But on the very rare days that I get it right: I make time for golf, I make time for coffee or dinner with friends, I make time for my siblings – their offspring and spouses. Time spent with them is my most treasured and special. I also make time for me and my partner to take breakaways. Between all of that, is pure and sheer hard-work, I'm afraid.

■ ***What can governments do to encourage businesswomen in SA?***

I am not too sure that this question is well located, because I do not believe that it is the sole responsibility of governments to encourage businesswomen to take their rightful space in the economy.

Government's mandate is only limited insofar as it relates to policy crafting. But the real engine itself is the economy which is largely in private hands. In my considered view it is absolutely that sector which needs to find value in the offering brought about by women and consider far more creative ways in which to extract value from the offering women bring in business.

■ ***How is the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation doing in empowering female business leaders?***

We have conducted research aimed at unpacking the motivations of female entrepreneurs, barriers they face, and what organisations can do to support them.

The research relied on an anonymous survey completed by 153 Allan Gray Orbis Foundation programme participants, which comprised 70% females. Of the sample, 31% males and 25% females have started or own a business, and of those who had not, 97% of the men and 98% of the women intend to be entrepreneurial in the future.

The primary goal of the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation is to contribute to an equitable South Africa, flourishing with meaningful employment, by nurturing the entrepreneurial potential of individuals selected from Southern Africa.

To achieve this, the Foundation needs to understand the gender gap in entrepreneurship, and the drivers of this disparity.

“ Currently, women make up over half of the programme participants in the Scholarship (58%), Fellowship (57%) and Association (56%). 54 Fellowentrepreneurs are female. ”

Our intention is to use the research to identify opportunities to further improve support provided to our female programme participants on their entrepreneurial journey.

Such as :

1. Strengthening our mentorship and coaching support so that our female entrepreneurs are able to gain access to mentors who are able to assist with the gender divide in terms of opportunities; mentors who are willing and able to assist with accessing and leveraging networks; and mentors who are willing to be shadowed.
 - In line with this, increasing the awareness of our industry mentorship programme in Year Explore (third year of university studies) and Year Experience (fourth and final year of university studies) of the Fellowship programme, in which supported programme participants are typically matched with mentors based on gender.
2. Exposure to female and female entrepreneurs' experiences and stories.
3. Female-focused and female-entrepreneur-focused events.

A large proportion of women suggested four types of support, that the Foundation could implement:

- Training and education on equality, gender-equality and transformation;
- Assistance/advice for female programme participants on how to navigate female-specific barriers to entrepreneurship;
- Improve representation of females and female entrepreneurs on panels, at events, and on marketing material; and
- Provide opportunities to network, and support for leveraging those networks.

📊 How do you think South Africa can help in the fight against GBV?

As an organisation that is heavily invested in the development of youth to reach their full potential as responsible high impact entrepreneurs and leaders, we have observed with great distress the recent spate of sexual and gender-based violence against women and children. We find these acts abhorrent with multi-layered consequences.

“ We are unequivocal in our stance against sexual harassment and violence in any form, as most of our programme participants and staff are women and girls. Brave, strong, independent, talented women and girls who deserve, as does anyone, safe spaces to live, work and play without fear. Campuses, schools and playgrounds should be safe places in which they are free to learn, interact, and grow into their full selves. ”

This requires us as a country to engage at all levels on how we will come together to prevent further acts of violence, including dedicated work with men and boys.

“ A good place to start is by positioning women's voices in a more prominent way. Ask and listen. Not just listen, but listen carefully and listen to act. All too often, government, policymakers and powers in the private and public sector are eager to speak to women but not to stand behind these conversations in a way that counts. We need these stakeholders to take a stand. ”

Put their money where their mouth is and make it happen for millions of women, who make life happen for many of us no matter the odds. It is now time, to even those odds.

📊 As we celebrate Women's Month in South Africa. Do you have any words of encouragement for all the women

out there?

Firstly, I would encourage women to be true to their craft and leave no margin for error – in whatever it is that they do. In doing so, they would allow their hard work to eventually pay off and speak on their behalf. Secondly, I would encourage women to stay the course and not to chop and change careers.

“ I would also implore them to be more ambitious, assertive and articulate. ”

I say this because I am convinced that women are imbued with such invaluable knowledge however it's amazing how many times I find myself in a boardroom full of men and one other woman (other than me) self-effacing away in her corner. I'm fortunate to have worked for people who allowed me to learn from my own mistakes – it is the same enablement I extend to those I lead in my organisation. They figured: “What doesn't kill a woman, makes her stronger and more truthful”. I suppose they were right.

“ Go out there, be emboldened by your convictions, work hard and celebrate every milestone and every victory because it fundamentally impacts another young one watching you. ”

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